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House Foreign Affairs Committee

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Ancient Communities Under Attack: ISIS's War on Religious Minorities

Thank you Chairman Royce and distinguished Members of the Committee, for inviting me today to share my views on Ancient Communities Under Attack: ISIS's War on Religious Minorities. I am Sister Diana Momeka of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, Mosul, Iraq. I'd like to request that my complete testimony be entered in to the Record.

In November 2009, a bomb was detonated at our convent in Mosul. Five sisters were in the building at the time and they were lucky to have escaped unharmed. Our Prioress, Sister Maria Hanna, asked for protection from local civilian authorities but the pleas went unanswered. As such, she had no choice but to move us to Qaraqosh.

Then on June 10, 2014, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS, invaded the Nineveh Plain, which is where Qaraqosh is located. Starting with the city of Mosul, ISIS overran one city and town after another, giving the Christians of the region three choices: **1.) convert to Islam, 2.) pay a tribute (Al-Jizya) to ISIS or 3.) leave their cities (like Mosul) with nothing more than the clothes on their back.**

As this horror spread throughout the Nineveh Plain, by August 6, 2014, Nineveh was emptied of Christians, and sadly, for the first time since the seventh century AD, no church bells rang for Mass in the Plain of Nineveh.

From June 2014 forward, more than a hundred and twenty thousand (120,000+) people found themselves displaced and homeless in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, leaving behind their heritage and all they had worked for over the centuries. This uprooting, this theft of everything that the Christians owned, displaced them body and soul, stripping away their humanity and dignity.

To add insult to injury, the initiatives and actions of both the Iraqi and Kurdish governments were at best modest and slow. Apart from allowing Christians to enter their region, the Kurdish government did not offer any aid either financial or material. I understand the great strain that these events have placed on Baghdad and Erbil however, it has been almost a year and Christian Iraqi citizens are still in dire need of help. Many people spent days and weeks in the streets before they found shelter in tents, schools and halls. Thankfully, the Church in the Kurdistan region stepped forward and cared for the displaced Christians, doing her very best to handle the

disaster. Church buildings were opened to accommodate the people; food and non-food items were provided to meet the immediate needs of the people; and medical health services were also provided. Moreover, the Church put out a call and many humanitarian organizations answered with aid for the thousands of people in need.

Presently, we are grateful for what has been done, with most people now sheltered in small prefabricated containers or some homes. Though better than living on the street or in an abandoned building, these small units are few in number and are crowded with three families, each with multiple people, often accommodated in one unit. This of course increases tensions and conflict, even within the same family.

There are many who say “Why don’t the Christians just leave Iraq and move to another country and be done with it?” To this question we would respond, “Why should we leave our country – what have we done?”

The Christians of Iraq are the first people of the land. You read about us in the Old Testament of the Bible. Christianity came to Iraq from the very earliest days through the preaching and witness of St Thomas and others of the Apostles and Church Elders.

While our ancestors experienced all kinds of persecution, they stayed in their land, building a culture that has served humanity for the ages. We, as Christians, do not want, or deserve to leave or be forced out of our country any more than you would want to leave or be forced out of yours. But the current persecution that our community is facing is the most brutal in our history. Not only have we been robbed of our homes, property and land, but our heritage is being destroyed as well. ISIS has and continues to demolish and bomb our churches, cultural artifacts and sacred places like Mar Behnam and his Sister Sara, a fourth century monastery and St. Georges Monastery in Mosul.

Uprooted and forcefully displaced, we have realized that ISIS’ plan is to evacuate the land of Christians and wipe the earth clean of any evidence that we ever existed. This is cultural and human genocide. The only Christians that remain in the Plain of Nineveh are those who are held as hostages.

The loss of the Christian Community from the Plain of Nineveh has placed the whole region on the edge of a terrible catastrophe. Christians have for centuries been the bridge that connects Eastern and Western cultures. Destroying this bridge will leave an isolated, inculturated conflict

zone emptied of cultural and religious diversity. Through our presence as Christians, we're called to be a force for good, for peace, for connection between cultures.

To restore, repair and rebuild the Christian community in Iraq, the following needs are urgent:

1. Liberating our homes from ISIS and helping us return.
2. A coordinated effort to rebuild what was destroyed – roads, water and electrical supplies, and buildings, including our churches and monasteries.
3. Encouraging enterprises that contribute to the rebuilding of Iraq and inter-religious dialogue. This could be through schools, academics and pedagogical projects.

I am but one, small person – a victim myself of ISIS and all of its brutality. Coming here has been difficult for me – as a religious sister I am not comfortable with the media and so much attention. But I am here and I am here to ask you, to implore you for the sake of our common humanity to help us. Stand with us as we, as Christians, have stood with all the people of the world and help us. We want nothing more than to go back to our lives; we want nothing more than to go home.

Thank you and God bless you